In his later years Ruskin developed a fascination with mythology, particularly Greek mythology. Lecturing on ‘The Art of England’ in 1883, he said: ‘The thoughts of all the greatest and wisest men hitherto, since the world was made, have been expressed through mythology’.1 His works began to carry mythological titles – *The Cestus of Aglaia, Ariadne Florentina, Proserpina, Deucalion, Queen of the Air* (about Athena) – as he proceeded to explore a mythical symbolism which he believed encoded timeless moral teachings, explained the relationship of Man and Nature and defined gender roles.2 Ruskin’s immersion in myth coincided with both the Victorian classical revival in painting and with the vogue for classical plays on both the professional and amateur stage through which Ruskin believed appreciation of great art and the principles of morality could be taught.

The Victorian classical revival in painting, which celebrated the civilizations and values of Greece and Rome, lasted from the 1860s to 1914. According to Christopher Wood in his authoritative *Olympian Dreamers* Victorian classicism is not easy to define. ‘Inevitably it meant different things to different people; it was an influence rather than a coherent body of opinion; a catalyst, rather than a clearly defined artistic movement’. In support of this view, he characterizes the leading classical painters: ‘the lofty aspirations of Leighton, the antiquarianism of Alma-Tadema, the aesthetic classicism of Moore and Burne-Jones, the decadence of Simeon Solomon and Aubrey Beardsley, and the high romanticism of Waterhouse’. What links them he suggests is that they were part of a reaction against the ‘domination of English art by Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites. The new generation of artists wished to break away from the moral straight-jacket of Ruskin, and the insularity of the Pre-Raphaelites, and to renew contact with the great
traditions of European art. But this is not entirely true and needs to be qualified.

The published lectures of leading Olympians Lord Leighton and Sir Edward Poynter would seem to underline this hostility to a Ruskinian position. Poynter’s Ten Lectures on Art (1880) were delivered when he was the Slade Professor at Oxford and were dedicated to Leighton. Lecture 9 was devoted to ‘Professor Ruskin on Michelangelo’. Stung by Ruskin’s comment on Poynter’s painting The Golden Age in his 1875 Academy Notes that ‘Mr Poynter’s object is to show us, like Michelangelo, the adaptability of limbs to awkward positions’, he launched an all-out attack on Ruskin and his values. Poynter thought that Ruskin’s comment on Michelangelo:

indicates a depth of ignorance on his part, wilful or unconscious, that could not be passed over; and its immediate effect was to induce me to read his lecture on Michelangelo and Tintoret, hitherto avoided by me, as, from what I had been told of it, a probable cause of vexation and annoyance. Truly it made me burn with indignation, and, the fire kindling, I felt impelled to point out the glaring perversions which Mr Ruskin’s curious spite against this greatest of artists allowed him to introduce into its pages; and not only this, but I felt it necessary to explain to my students, likely to be misled by his special pleading, the general blindness to the higher qualities of art, which is observable... in all Mr Ruskin’s later writings, and which is the necessary result of his want of observation of the highest form of natural beauty, and of his ignorance of the practical side of art.

He professes respect for Ruskin’s ‘exalted views, unrivalled power of poetic description and his knowledge and love of natural history’ but he notes that ‘Mr Ruskin has so consistently elevated the moral and sentimental side of art over the aesthetic, that we are tempted to suspect him of never having had any perception of beauty in art, as distinguished from beauty in nature; and we may search his later writings in vain for any appreciation of beauty of form or colour’.

He claims that Ruskin has set himself up as a high priest intolerant of dissent and who expects his ex cathedra judgements to be ‘taken in faith’. He goes on: ‘it is certain that, as far as experience is a qualification, his opinion as to the comparative merits of fresco and oil-painting is absolutely valueless’. Already in lecture 2, he had set himself against Ruskin’s theory, declaring flatly ‘that the moral nature of beauty is of the kind that cannot be expressed in painting or sculpture; that